

It takes a Big Society to fix a footbridge

Margot Bright, of the Westbourne Park Villas Residents' Association, writes: As this issue went to press, the Chancellor of the Exchequer told us that the Crossrail scheme will proceed. This is of small comfort to the many local residents who have been kicked in the teeth yet again with the announcement that the footbridge over the railway (from Westbourne Park Villas) will not now get its step-free access until 2017. The reaction of some - including SEBRA's Chairman, and two cyclists and a woman with a pushchair who heard the news while struggling up those near-vertical steps - is best left unprinted.

Karen Buck, the local MP, whose Westminster North constituency now includes residents on both sides of the bridge in Bayswater and Westbourne said 'This is bitterly disappointing, especially given the amount of work that you, SEBRA and others have put into it over months and years, and all the effort that went into the Sustrans bid.'

Councillor Brian Connell called the delay 'a terrible blow to our community, not least when we're bearing all the disruption caused by the construction works.' As a local Councillor, and also a governor of the Academy which sits beside the north end of the bridge, he pledged to do what he could to get the works done sooner. What he could not do, evidently, was protect the plan to spend £200,000 in 2011, and £310,000 in 2012 on 'Westbourne footbridge and links'. That was axed in August by the Cabinet Urgency Committee.

But the long sorry saga of the footbridge is not really about money, not - withstanding the current austerity drive. It's about complexity, and the sclerotic red-tape-wrapped inability of our taxpayer-funded institutions to work together to fix a small thing like a footbridge - a running sore for decades, and a source of immense frustration for the Council.

Danny Trup, Crossrail's Manager responsible for this section of the works, said lack of cash is not to blame for this latest delay; it's the 'unexpected complexity of the above-ground railway works'. Unexpected complexity? The Crossrail Act broke all records for the time it took to get through select committees in both houses of Parliament. No footbridge in the country has had more parliamentary time spent on it, not to mention all the long hours put in by Graham King, the

'Muggers' Footbridge' today, dingy and dark; the bend hiding troublemakers . . .



Council's head of strategic planning, in trying to bring all the relevant players into alignment - including Sustrans, who so nearly came to the rescue with their £600,000 lottery grant, to take advantage of the one moment, the building of Crossrail, that would allow the job to be done sensibly and cost-effectively.

Brian Connell was Cabinet Member for Education and the driving force in getting the Academy built when the former Council leader, Sir Simon Milton, embarked on the ambitious and much-needed programme to improve Westbourne Green, and asked local people what was needed. Near the top of the residents' wish list was a safe, user-friendly replacement for the notorious 'Muggers' Bridge'. That was seven years ago.

Far more people now use the bridge, including most of the 2,000 members

. . . and how it could be. The Tavistock footbridge half a mile to the west.

of the luxurious Harbour Club next to the Academy. A surprising number of old people, mothers with pushchairs and cyclists struggle up its steps. For the Academy's staff and its 950 pupils this is an official 'walk to school route' endorsed by Transport for London (owners of Crossrail), and by the Mayor and the Council. Grown-ups, from Peers of the Realm to local Councillors, say they would be afraid to use that bridge after dark, so how come children are expected to do so as the nights close in?

The cost of a new bridge, which its owners Network Rail say would be £3 million-plus, sounds high; railway works are always expensive, but it is a drop in the ocean of our money, from local and central government, that is being poured into Westbourne and the three other poorest Wards in the north of the borough. (The total, including NHS funding, has been estimated at over £3 billion over seven years.) A new bridge is by far the most sensible way to provide what's needed, say all the engineers.

If the long list of groups affected, including of course the communities both sides of the bridge, doesn't constitute a Big Society, I don't know what does. And what has it produced? An unworkable sketch for a £750,000 ramp to replace the steps, now shelved for seven years, a promise of jazzily-painted new panels on the rickety old structure, and still-vaguer commitments to CCTV and better lighting.

Oh, and the absurdly vulnerable lights which the Council installed at the Academy end never work. The fittings get smashed. Well they would in No Man's Land, wouldn't they?